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SOURDOUGH



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Sourdough

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Sourdough, another word for an Alaskan oldtimer, also means a yeasty starter for leavening hotcakes, waffles, muffins, bread, and even cake. To those who lived alone or in a small group of three or four, mining, trapping, or homesteading, sourdough became the basis of their "staff of life." Bread could not be made without it, so the "starter" became a precious possession.

In the early days of Alaska, bread making at home was a necessity. Food supplies came only once or twice a year by ship and then were transferred to small boats, river steamers, dog sleds or backpacks to reach their destination. Many localities received supplies only when a steamer could navigate the river or the lake during the few months of

summer thaw. Orders placed the year before required careful selection with close attention to keeping qualities as the enroute timing proved uncertain.

Yeast became deactivated in a short time and could deteriorate entirely enroute, especially if unusual ice formation and heavy wind or seas delayed the ships' entry into rivers or ports of call. Ordinary yeast plants, sensitive to the extreme cold, refused to grow, while the combination of wild or adapted yeast in the sourdough starter proved as tough as its oldtimer namesake. Or did the oldtimer resemble and get his name from the indomitable sourdough starter? Choose whichever theory pleases you most.

Sourdough Recipes

To Make Sourdough Starter

For best results use glass or pottery containers. Never use a metal container or leave a metal spoon in the starter. A good starter contains only flour, water, and yeast. It has a clean, sour milk odor. The liquid will separate from the batter when it stands several days, but this does not matter. If replenished every few days with flour and more water, the starter keeps fresh. If starter is not to be used for several weeks, freeze or dry it to keep it from spoiling. To carry it to camp, add enough flour to shape it into a ball and place it in a sack of flour. In the dried form the yeast goes into a spore stage which will keep inert for a long time like old-fashioned yeast foam. Water and warmth bring the yeast back to the active stage.

Mix well: 2 cups flour 2 cups warm water
 1 package dry yeast or 1 yeast cake

Place in a warm place or closed cupboard overnight. In the morning put $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the starter in a scalded pint jar with a tight cover and store in the refrigerator or a cool place for future use. This is sourdough starter. The remaining batter can be used for pancakes, waffles, muffins, bread, or cake immediately.

Commercial sourdough starters now on the market are dried and powdered. Adding water brings it to life. In growing, the yeast gives off a carbon dioxide gas which forms bubbles in the dough. The lactic acid bacteria changes

starch and sugar to lactic acid, giving the dough a sour odor. Soda is added to react with the acid to form more gas which makes the batter lighter. If too much soda is added, the product is brownish when baked. If too little soda is used, the product tastes sour. Add the soda just before baking. In any sourdough recipe it is most helpful to reserve one tablespoon of the liquid to dissolve the soda. Add this to the batter last, mix thoroughly, and bake. Never add soda to the starter, as it kills the yeast.

Sourdough Hotcakes

Sourdough hotcakes, the main breakfast dish of prospectors, miners, and oldtime Alaskans, differ from other hotcakes in that the batter is leavened with a yeast starter and soda. The starter must be set the night before it is to be used. The starter, replenished every week with flour and water, will last weeks, even years. Some Alaskans are still using a starter traced back to an original starter brought into the country with the gold rush. To them the sourdough pot is a prized possession.

Set the sponge for sourdough hotcakes the night before your Alaskan breakfast. Place the starter in a medium size mixing bowl. Add 2 cups warm water and 2 cups flour. Beat well and set in a warm place, free from draft, to develop overnight. In the morning the batter will have gained $\frac{1}{2}$ again its bulk and be covered with air bubbles. It will have a pleasant yeasty odor.

Sourdough Hotcakes for Three Persons — Set aside $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sponge in the refrigerator jar for your sourdough

starter for next time. To remaining sponge add:

1 or 2 eggs	1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon soda	1 tablespoon sugar

Beat with a fork and blend in all ingredients. Add 2 tablespoons melted fat. Bake on a hot griddle. Turn once. Serve with a mixture of hot brown-sugar syrup, or honey and melted butter. Molasses, jelly or rose hip syrup are other tasty combinations.

For interesting variations add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup whole wheat flour; cornmeal; wheat germ; or branflakes to the batter. (2 eggs will provide the liquid for this addition.)

Sourdough Waffles

Set the sponge as for hotcakes. Make it slightly thicker. Let stand overnight. Remove the usual $\frac{1}{2}$ cup starter for next time, and to the remaining sponge add:

1 teaspoon salt	1 teaspoon soda
2 tablespoons sugar	2 eggs
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup melted fat	

Mix well and add fat just before baking. Bake according to directions that came with the waffle iron.

Sourdough Muffins

In the evening, or 6 to 8 hours before using, set the sponge as for hotcakes. In the morning save $\frac{1}{2}$ cup for next starter, as usual, and to the remaining sponge add:

$\frac{1}{2}$ cups whole wheat flour	1 teaspoon soda
$\frac{1}{2}$ cup sugar	1 cup raisins (optional)
1 teaspoon salt	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup melted fat
$\frac{1}{4}$ cup non-fat dry milk	1 or 2 eggs

Sift dry ingredients into a bowl. Make a well in the center. Mix egg and fat thoroughly with the sponge. Add this to the well in the flour. Stir only enough to moisten the flour. Fill greased muffin tins $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Bake in 375°F. oven for 30 to 35 minutes. Yields 20 small or 12 large muffins.

Sourdough Bread

Set sponge as for hotcakes and let stand in a warm place overnight or for 6 to 8 hours. Save $\frac{1}{2}$ cup for next starter. To the remaining sponge, which should be about 2 cups, add:

4 cups sifted flour (or more)	1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons sugar	2 tablespoons fat
(1/4 teaspoon soda added later)	

Sift dry ingredients into a bowl, making a well in the center. Add fat to the sponge and mix well. Pour into the well of flour. Add enough flour to make a soft dough for kneading.

Knead on a floured board for 10 to 15 minutes. Place in a greased bowl. Cover with a towel and let rise in a warm place for 2 to 4 hours or until doubled. Dissolve the $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of soda in a tablespoon of warm water and add to the dough. Knead it in thoroughly. Shape dough into loaves in bread pans and set aside to rise. When doubled, bake at 375°F. for 50 to 60 minutes.

Sourdough French Bread

Prepare as above (but with a package of yeast added in the starter). Shape into two loaves by dividing the dough in half. Roll each half into a 15" x 12" rectangle. Wind up tightly toward you, beginning with the wide side. Seal edges by pinching together. Place rolls diagonally on greased baking sheets which have been lightly sprinkled with cornmeal. Let rise until doubled, about 1 hour. Brush with cold water. Cut with scissors or knife to make 1 or 2 lengthwise or several diagonal $\frac{1}{4}$ " deep slits across tops of loaves. Place in a hot (400°F.) oven with a pan of boiling water. Bake 15 minutes. Remove from oven and brush again with water. Reduce the temperature to 350°F. and bake 35 to 40 minutes until golden brown. Brush a third time with cold water and bake 2 to 3 minutes longer. Makes two French loaves.

Sourdough Wheat Bread

2 cups sourdough starter	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt
(set the previous night)	2 tablespoons sugar
1 cup whole wheat or graham flour	1 cup white flour

Combine ingredients and mix well with a fork — this sponge will be sticky. Set in a warm cupboard for 2 hours or more. Turn out on a warm, well-floured board. Knead 1 or more cups white flour into the dough for 5 to 10 minutes. Shape into a round loaf and place in a well-greased pie pan. Grease sides and top of loaf, cover with a towel and let rise 1 hour or until doubled. Bake in a preheated oven at 450°F. for 10 minutes, then reduce heat to 375°F. and bake 30 to 40 minutes longer. Makes one large loaf.

(If starter is very sour, add $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon soda to the flour that is kneaded in on the board.)

Casserole Bread

Use same ingredients and method as for Sourdough Bread. Do not knead the dough, but beat it 2 minutes at medium speed setting of the mixer or 300 strokes by hand. Let stand in mixing bowl until double in bulk. Add $\frac{1}{4}$

teaspoon soda. Mix $\frac{1}{2}$ minute, turn into greased casserole or loaf pan and let stand 40 minutes. Bake as for Sourdough Bread. Bread is done when crust sounds hollow when tapped.

Variations

Substitute 1 cup whole wheat for 1 cup of the white flour; use honey, brown sugar or light molasses instead of sugar; or juice of one orange and the grated orange rind for orange bread.

Sourdough Chocolate Cake

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup thick starter	$1\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour
1 cup water	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup non-fat dry milk

Mix and let ferment 2 to 3 hours in a warm place until

bubbly and there is a clean sour milk odor. Add:

1 cup sugar	1 teaspoon cinnamon
$\frac{1}{2}$ cup shortening	$1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons soda
$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt	2 eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla	3 squares melted chocolate

Cream fat, sugar, flavorings, salt and soda. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Combine creamed mixture and melted chocolate with sourdough mixture. Stir 300 strokes or mix at low speed until blended. Pour into two layer pans or one larger pan. Bake at 350°F. for 25 to 30 minutes. Cool and frost with Butterscotch-Chocolate Frosting or other icing of your choice.

Butterscotch-Chocolate Frosting — In saucepan combine three 1-ounce squares of unsweetened chocolate, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter or margarine, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup light cream, $\frac{2}{3}$ cup brown sugar (packed), and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt. Bring to boil, stirring constantly; cook until chocolate is melted. Remove from heat, add vanilla and enough confectioners sugar for good spreading consistency (about 3 cups). Spread over sides and top of cake.

Sourdough Yarns

Various stories tell of the sourdough starter's origin. The most credible are as follows:

"Sourdough Pete," when a young man, came to Alaska from Michigan at the turn of the century to seek his fortune. His grandmother, who had pioneered in the Michigan woods, knew a thing or two about hardships in a new land. Her parting gift, a crock of yeast starter for hotcakes and bread, made him famous over the land. With the help of a sack of flour, "Sourdough Pete" always had hotcakes to eat whether he struck it rich or not. He shared it with friends who, the story tells, walked miles to renew or get a starter of the yeast product. Pete became known for his generosity and his name "Sourdough Pete" originated.

* * * *

In 1900 an Alaskan prospector married an Indian girl. They started a sourdough pot and kept the starter going by using it regularly. When she died and the husband became ill, he refused to go to the hospital if he had to leave his sourdough pot. "It is all I have left of my wife," he said. It was given to a woman friend to guard. She kept her promise and used the starter once a week. From it, she gave starters to countless other Alaskans. It is an especially good starter with a clean aroma and flavor.

* * * *

Other stories of sourdough's survival in spite of hardships and rigors in the far northern interior explain that the pot of starter needed putting "to bed" in the coldest weather. Under the covers, sharing its owner's body warmth, the starter survived to leaven the next day's supply of hot-

cakes. Between camps, it was the last item placed in the packsack and the first item to be removed upon arrival at the new site.

* * * *

Another version of the care taken to keep the starter safe on journeys states that the owner wore it in a bag around his neck inside his shirt on long and cold journeys, and an old sourdough warns: "If the starter turns orange, it is not spoiled; but if it turns green, it must be discarded."

Modern Alaskans do not use discolored starters, but keep the starter clean and fresh in a refrigerator or other cool place and use it weekly.

Tanning Hides

Sourdough has other uses, too, as this bit of information from an old trapper explains:

To tan small hides such as mink, rabbit, ermine, or muskrat, first wash the hide with lukewarm soapy water, using a mild soap. Lay the skin on a flat board, hair side down. Cover it with a thick batter of sourdough. When dough begins to dry, start working the skin. Rub it with a circular motion against the palm of the left hand. Rub and knead the skin until it is dry and soft.